



PACIFIC PERSPECTIVES ON THE WORLD

LISTENING TO AUSTRALIA'S ISLAND NEIGHBOURS IN ORDER TO
BUILD STRONG, RESPECTFUL AND SUSTAINABLE RELATIONSHIPS



A Whitlam Institute Research Project

Executive Summary

By Peacifica

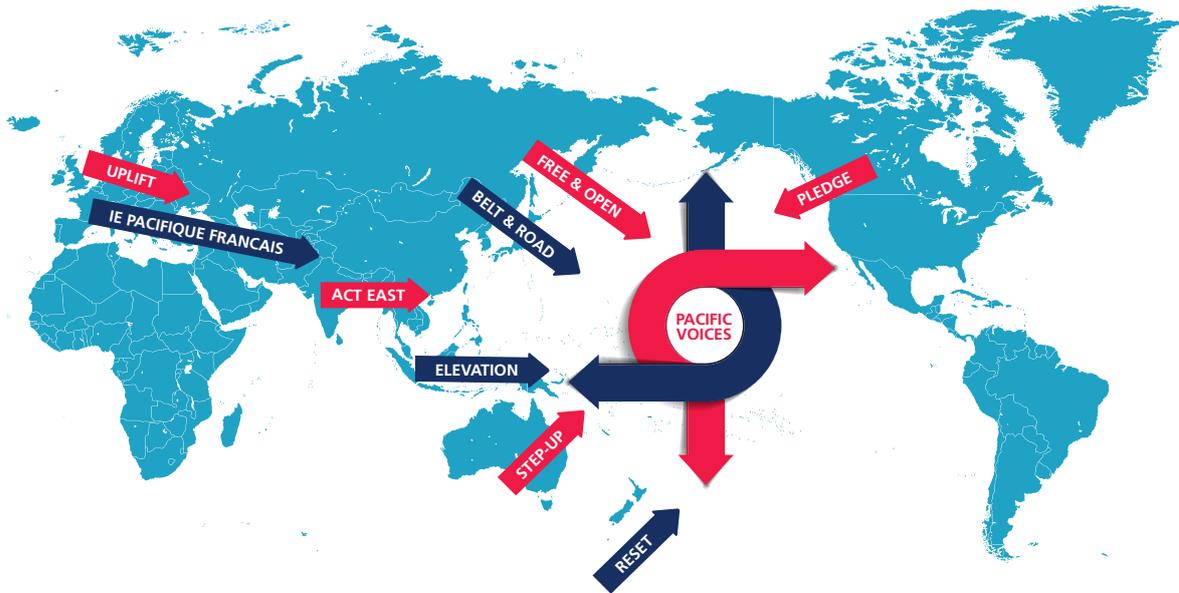
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Executive Summary

After a long absence, the world has rediscovered the Pacific. Following this escalation of international interest in the Pacific over the last decade, the region finds itself the subject of as many as a dozen new international initiatives, most notably China's Belt and Road initiative, Australia's Pacific Step-up and the broader Indo-Pacific geostrategic phenomenon.

As these initiatives have proliferated, the Pacific peoples themselves have reclaimed their own voices, heard most prominently in the world's global climate discourse and in the region's own Blue Pacific initiative. But there is a way to go before the region's own voice has equal weight.



Australia's Step-up is one of many international initiatives facing toward the Pacific. A strong Pacific voice is emerging as a counterweight to them.

Australia's Pacific Step-up, while welcome, shares with its international counterparts this weakness: though well-intentioned, it has been conceived as an external initiative. The Whitlam Institute is concerned that Australia's past and emerging engagement in the region pays insufficient attention to Pacific perspectives – not only official positions but also the voices of ordinary people from across the region. The Institute engaged Peacifica to contribute to filling this gap, to learn from a cross-section of Pacific islanders about their perspectives on the world and their place in it and how other countries (notably Australia) can best contribute to their future. This report, and the field interviews and conversations that support it, are the first stage in a dialogue that the Institute and Peacifica hope will continue as a constructive contribution to the well-being of all Pacific people and to the promotion of a secure and prosperous region. We want to see an enhanced and comprehensive Australian foreign policy engagement that can better position Australia as a member of the Pacific community.

The research was conducted in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, three countries with which Australia has deep historical, social and economic connections. Its findings relate specifically to those places, but due to the methodologies employed, some can be inferred with confidence to apply more widely given their prominence across the research sites and broader discourses in the region. We will be taking the findings back to the region to explore these questions further.

The research team, comprising Australian and Pacific island researchers, spent time in the three countries in September and October 2019. Around 150 people from diverse backgrounds participated through a series of focus groups and key informant interviews, followed by expert seminars in November, in Canberra and Suva, at which initial findings were presented and discussed.

Critical to these conversations was the freedom given to participants themselves to identify what was important. The few questions asked by the researchers invited participants to reflect on their hopes for their future and what roles their own governments and people, as well as external ones had to play to realise that future. The team did not ask about climate change, labour migration or aid – all issues came from the participants themselves. From this the research team, led by Dr Tess Newton Cain, identified the key themes and recommendations that emerged from the data.

Key messages

Three key messages emerged from the conversations that comprise this research.

1 Quality relationships matter more than quantities of aid, trade or other engagement. Australia does not need to prove itself by giving the most – the country is already recognised as being intrinsic and essential to the Pacific island states. It is this underlying positive disposition that drives the occasionally very strong critique of Australia by its Pacific neighbours. They want relationships that put the concerns of Pacific peoples on a par with those of Australia, that reach beyond the narrow bands of government and civil society, that prioritise local ownership and that recognise our shared histories and identities. This valuing of quality over quantity is reflected in the mismatch between the increasing number of Australian programs, projects and initiatives and the infrequency of their being referenced by the people we listened to.

2 Values, norms and ways of doing things matter a great deal to Pacific islanders from Solomon Islands, Fiji and Vanuatu. Pacific islanders embody multiple identities from the village to the region, and these inform how they engage with the world, including with Australians. Interacting in sympathy with this 'Pacific Mode' of working together – in all its complexities and commonalities - is essential.

3 Australia is one of many potential relationships for Pacific islanders. The domestic concerns of Pacific islanders are connected more than ever before to global ones, notably but not exclusively through the climate crisis. Many participants in the research also recognise the region's geostrategic significance. This recognition of their needs and potential leverage are giving them more urgency and more confidence in working with international partners, chiefly other Pacific states, Australia, New Zealand and China. In this environment Australia's natural advantages are confounded by our inability to engage with the 'Pacific Mode'.

Recommendations

Positive change in Australia's relationship with the region must start with, but is not limited to, the Australian government. Even as the Pacific Step-up has been acknowledged as progress in the right direction, it is only a first step if Australia is to realise the full potential of its Pacific relationships. We recommend action in four areas to put Australia more firmly on that path:

1 Shift gears on the Step-up: The research participants see Australian engagement with the region, including the Pacific Step-up, predominantly as unilateral initiatives of Australia. They comprise things that are done **for** or **to** the Pacific, not **with** it. Pacific people are looking for reassurance that Australia shares their concerns and is working alongside them, as an equal partner, to address *shared* challenges. As a start we recommend that the Australian government:

- Convene a regional Partnership Summit, at which diverse participants from civil society, private sector, government, community and churches from across the region can explore themes of most significance to Pacific peoples. For the Australian contingent, strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and participation is essential.
- Deepen relationships beyond the capitals, both in the Pacific states and in Australia. A multiplicity of civil society, sporting, commercial, religious and cultural links are ready to be developed, in some cases building on existing initiatives.
- Improve government, private sector and NGO partnerships by encouraging Australian government agencies, businesses and INGOs to better recognise existing local capacity and support the development of new capacity where requested.
- Encourage INGOs to transfer power to local civil society organisations to increase perceived levels of trust, autonomy and open communication.

2 Invest in Australia's Pacific Literacy: Pacific islanders know more about Australia than we do about them. We are in effect stepping up without knowing where we are going. This can be addressed by:

- Promoting knowledge of the Pacific, including its languages, in Australian schools and universities and through mainstream media.¹
- Developing a 'Pacific Capable' strategy to prepare Australia and Australians to live, work, and socialise with Pacific island people in their own country and in the countries of the region.
- Working with Pacific diaspora communities to build the capacity of government departments and agencies, contractors and INGOs that work in the region.

3 Get our own house in order: Pacific islanders look past Australia's coastline when they turn their gaze in our direction, and they see several things that make them uneasy. Among the most prominent of these are the status of Indigenous Australians, climate policy and inequality of trade opportunities. We recommend that Australia:

- Demonstrate a systematic, consistent and constructive long-term approach to climate change mitigation and adaptation in line with the Boe Declaration and the planned 2050 strategy, to be considered at the 51st meeting of Pacific Islands Forum leaders.
- Demonstrate real change in the status of Indigenous Australians. Pacific islanders want to be able to see that Indigenous Australians are visible and active throughout Australian society and that the Australian world-view is informed by Indigenous perspectives and leadership.

¹ Some limited tertiary programs and media initiatives exist, but are not enough to meet the need. See the full recommendations for details.

4 Level the playing field when it comes to access: Travel to Australia, and doing business here, are perennial headaches for Pacific people. These concerns were raised repeatedly and by participants of all backgrounds. Action in this area would be a potent symbol of Australia's good faith towards the region. We recommend that Australia:

- Make it easier for all Pacific people to travel to and work in Australia through increased access to short-term visas, student and professional exchange programs.
- Prioritise products from the Pacific for regulatory and administrative processes (e.g. biosecurity approval) to get them into Australian markets.
- Hold a regular Pacific Expo in Australia to showcase both primary and value-added products and foster business to business ties.

In aiming to understand Pacific perspectives on the world and Australia's place in the region, this research started with two assumptions and finishes with them being confirmed – but with important lessons. One assumption was that Australia is respected and recognised for its decades-long contribution to the Pacific. The other was that listening to our Pacific neighbours more will lay the foundation for better relationships.

The first lesson for Australia cuts to the heart of our self-image as good mates. Despite Australia's valued history of contribution, the ways in which those we listened to talked about the distance between us, and their sense of sadness as they did so, should trouble anyone who values the idea of Australia as part of the Pacific community. The second lesson is the unexpected realisation that in seeing ourselves through Pacific islander eyes, we Australians will get to know ourselves better. If we want to realise our shared vision of a peaceful and prosperous future, not only must we improve our Pacific island relationships, we also need to work on things at home.

